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AUTHOR Bowman, Harry L.; Brown, G. Wayne
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ABSTRACT

The current practice of accrediting technical education is based on a set of policies and comprehensive standards pertaining to all aspects of the institution. These policies and standards are applied by institutional personnel to conduct a self-study based on the school's mission and by an independent team of technical educators-evaluators to conduct an on-site assessment. A new outcomes-based approach to accreditation of postsecondary occupational or technical education institutions has been proposed. The new approach, which emphasizes quality assurance and is based on accreditation approaches used and/or advocated by the Commission on Occupational Education Institutions (COEI) of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, emphasizes the following components: (1) occupational/skill standards as the basis for program design; (2) skill assessment/certification as the basis for assessing program effectiveness with individuals; and (3) job placement of training recipients as the basis for assessing institutional effectiveness in meeting job market needs. It is estimated that minimum of 2 years will be required for transition from the current accreditation system to the new system. The target date for completion of the development and adoption of the COEI's revised accreditation standards is December 1995. Includes a flowchart showing the accreditation process. (MN)

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OUTCOMES-BASED OCCUPATIONAL EDUCATION ACCREDITATION: A NEW VISION FOR EDUCATIONAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

Harry L. Bowman
G. Wayne Brown
Commission on Occupational Education Institutions
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
Decatur, Georgia

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Abstract

Institutional accreditation is a process created in the United States initially to promote standardization among schools of common types, e. g., high schools (COPA, 1990; Bogue & Saunders, 1992). In recent years, accreditation has been assigned a primary role in assuring educational program quality as a prerequisite for postsecondary institutions to participate in federal student financial aid programs. The primary purpose of this presentation is to describe a new vision of accreditation for occupational education, more commonly called "technical education" today, that focuses on the outcomes of workforce preparation programs.

Technical education accreditation as practiced currently utilizes a set of policies and comprehensive standards pertaining to all aspects of the institution that are applied by (1) institutional personnel to conduct a self-study based on the school's mission and (2) an independent team of technical educators-evaluators to conduct an on-site assessment using the same policies and standards. The new vision of technical education quality assurance places major emphases on three components: (1) occupational/skill standards as the basis for program design, (2) skill assessment/certification as the basis for assessing program effectiveness with individuals, and (3) job placement of training recipients as the basis for assessing institutional effectiveness in meeting job market needs.

This presentation addresses in some detail the features and use of an outcomes-based accreditation strategy to illustrate the multiple dimensions of educational quality assurance and its importance to students, employers of occupational education recipients, and the public.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present a view of accreditation as a system for assuring quality in postsecondary occupational or technical education institutions. As a foundation for discussing a proposed new accreditation system, the current system will be described by presenting an overview of accreditation, a description of the current technical institution accreditation system, and quality assurance aspects of this system. Then, the envisioned system with an outcomes-based emphasis will be discussed with respect to the vision, the partners, and the tentative implementation strategy. Both the current system and the new system represent accreditation approaches used and/or advocated by the Commission on Occupational Education Institutions (COEI), Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS).

Overview of Accreditation

Accreditation is a system to recognize educational institutions or professional programs that meet prescribed levels or standards of integrity, performance, and quality (Council on Postsecondary

Accreditation, 1990, p 3). From a product perspective, accreditation can be defined as a status ascribed to an institution or a program that has undergone evaluation and met stated criteria of educational quality (Young, Chambers, Kells, & Associates, 1983, p. 443). Accreditation of an institution by COEI is a recognition granted to an occupational education institution indicating that it complies with the policies, standards, and procedures adopted by the member institutions of the Commission. Accreditation by COEI does not, however, certify that all components of an institution are of equal quality, but does indicate that none of the components is weak enough to undermine the educational effectiveness of the institution as a whole (Coulton, 1990, p. 393).

Accreditation is a private, voluntary, non-governmental, decentralized process that is unique to postsecondary education in the United States of America. In many countries, the establishment and application of educational standards are performed by a central government agency. In this country, the public authority to regulate education has been reserved to the states under the Constitution. Accreditation has evolved as a mechanism to promote educational quality through the identification and application of quality standards by peers in a particular sector of the education community or a specific professional field.

The accreditation status of a school is important because it is considered to varying degrees in formal actions by many agencies and individuals, for example, governmental funding agencies, foundations, employers, counselors, parents, and potential students. The general public is inclined to accept accreditation as a quality assurance indicator more readily than recently devised measures (e. g., program reviews, graduate surveys, and rankings). In the view of Bogue and Saunders (1992, p. 29), accreditation is probably the most widely recognized and highly regarded form of quality assurance among constituents of American postsecondary education. The activities and resources required to achieve and maintain accreditation are demanding and expensive in terms of personnel time and costs. These resources are well spent, however, when educational effectiveness and quality are enhanced through the accreditation process.

The Current COEI Accreditation System

COEI was created in 1971 as a result of a conference on occupational education that was held in April, 1967, under the sponsorship of SACS. During the ensuing four years, a committee on occupational education developed and field tested the policies, standards, and procedures that were

used initially by COEI for school accreditation. Those policies, standards, and procedures have been expanded and refined over the years as the nature and variety of technical education programs have changed. A schematic depiction of the accreditation process based on COEI policies, standards, and procedures (Commission on Occupational Education Institutions, 1994) is presented in Figure 1. The major stages of the accreditation process are described briefly below.

The first stage in the accreditation process is an intensive self-study that is conducted by school personnel to measure progress toward achieving stated objectives. The primary focus of the self-study is on the policies and 12 standards for accreditation that have been adopted by the COEI member institutions. The policies cover many procedural and operational aspects of an institution. The standards address the following areas: institutional mission, organization and administration, long-range planning, educational programs, staff, facilities, equipment and supplies, financial resources, learning resources, placement and follow-up, student personnel services, and community relations.

The second stage is an on-site evaluation of the school by a visiting team of professional educators and specialists, accompanied by lay persons at times. The visiting team assesses the school in reference to the COEI policies and standards as well as the institution's self-study. The team makes professional judgments about the extent of compliance with the policies and standards and may offer suggestions for the improvement of educational practices based on team members' expertise. The team submits a written report on its findings, recommendations, and suggestions to the accrediting agency which, in turn, shares the report with the school.

If the team report contains any recommendations indicating non-compliance with any policies and/or standards, the third stage in the process is the preparation and submission of a report by the school to the accrediting agency to address those recommendations. The school is expected to have eliminated the deficiencies identified in the recommendations or at least to have implemented a plan to correct the deficiencies. The response report details those actions taken by the school following the team visit to comply with the COEI policies and standards.

The final stage in the process is action by the Commission regarding accreditation of the school. The Commission relies on the self-study, team report, and response report, if applicable, to make its decision. The action is based on the documentation that is provided to demonstrate compliance of the institution with the policies and standards of the Commission. Any adverse decision

of the Commission can be appealed in accordance with procedures established by the membership. The reaffirmation of an institution's accreditation follows the same cycle and is conducted within two to six years.

Quality Assurance Aspects of COEI Accreditation

The discussion below is intended to elaborate on significant aspects of the COEI accreditation system that contribute to institutional quality assurance. Many aspects of accreditation by COEI are designed to ensure educational quality in accredited occupational/technical education institutions. Several of the more significant features of the process are discussed here.

First, the policies and standards used as the basis for evaluating COEI institutions were developed and are periodically modified by occupational education specialists with expertise in all facets of operations and programs of such schools. In addition to placing emphasis on the processes and products of educational programs, special attention is given to several factors that are essential for technical education institutions. These factors include systematic long-range planning, appropriate training equipment and materials, effective placement and follow-up procedures (completers and non-completers), and positive relationships with the community that supplies and employs students.

Second, the types of personnel involved in the evaluation of occupational schools and programs contribute to the assurance of educational quality. School evaluation team members, who are selected by COEI from outside a school's geographic area, must have demonstrated expertise and experience related to the occupational programs offered by the institution. In addition, continuous review and evaluation of technical schools is required through the use of institutional and program advisory committees that have extensive representation of employer groups.

Third, the procedures applied in the accreditation process place emphasis on qualitative assessment of COEI institutions. The process begins with a review of an institution before it is accepted as a candidate for accreditation to assure that it meets eligibility criteria and is likely to achieve accreditation within three years. An exhaustive self-study must be conducted by institutional personnel to assess all facets of the school based on the COEI policies and standards. An on-site evaluation of the institution is performed by a team of occupational education specialists as described above. The team applies the COEI policies and standards in a qualitative assessment of the institution that is presented in a written report to the Commission. The report includes documentation of any

deficiencies with respect to the policies and standards as well as recommendations for areas that require action to alleviate the deficiencies. The institution is required to respond to each recommendation by indicating the steps taken to address the deficiencies.

Fourth, the evaluation of COEI institutions focuses intensively on the processes and products of educational programs. The on-site evaluation of an occupational school includes a thorough examination of course content (objectives and organization), student progress assessment procedures, and course completion criteria. Observation of instruction is an integral part of the evaluation. In addition, the products of educational programs are thoroughly assessed. While course performance data are useful in this regard, the evaluation depends more heavily on placement and satisfactory job performance of program completers. Placement records provide a partial assessment of program products. Interviews are conducted with program completers, employers, and school/program advisory committee members to determine the quality of the preparation provided by the technical school.

Fifth, the decision to accredit an occupational education institution is made on the basis of the aggregate evidence that the institution is in compliance with the COEI policies and standards. This decision is made by the 19 commissioners who comprise the Commission on Occupational Education Institutions. The commissioners represent various segments of the technical school community and the public who are elected by representatives of COEI member schools. The independence of the institutional evaluation and the accreditation decision contributes positively to the assurance of educational quality in accredited institutions.

The overriding emphasis in the accreditation of an occupational education institution is placed on the congruence between the products of the institution and its mission. The validation of an institution's impact as assessed by its outcomes, results, or products is imperative to maintain the credibility of the accreditation process and the integrity of the institution.

The commitment of COEI to product assessment is evident in its accreditation policies and standards. Emphases are placed on the specifications of criteria for program completion, level of success in the placement of completers, and follow-up assessment of program effectiveness by completers and employers. In addition, COEI institutions must involve representatives of career fields

for which students are prepared in reviewing and evaluating programs to ensure that the products of these programs (i.e., the completers) have the competencies needed for success on the job.

The decision to accredit any technical school - whether public or non-public - is based ultimately on the quality of the preparation students receive for careers in technical fields. The expenditure of public or personal funds for occupational education should be made with the assurance that students who enroll in particular programs are likely to succeed in completing the programs, to secure placement in the career field, and to perform satisfactorily on the job.

The Vision of Outcomes-Based Accreditation

The importance of technical education to the future of the country is reflected in national policies as expressed in several federal programs. Examples of federal initiatives that address this concern are the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act, the Job Training Partnership Act, the Job Corps Centers, the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, and the School-To-Work Opportunities Act. The legislative mandate given to the National Skill Standards Board in the Goals 2000: Educate America Act is especially significant to future workforce preparation as it relates to the development of skill standards and assessment/certification of skill standards attainment. Additional legislation that would have implications for workforce preparation is expected to address reemployment and welfare reform.

The goal of the new accrediting system envisioned by the leaders of COEI will be to assure quality and integrity in occupational education programs. (Hereafter, the term "new COEI" will be used to refer to the new system and its accrediting agency.) To achieve this goal, COEI will review and revise its standards to stress the use of:

- skill standards as the basis for designing programs that address current job market needs,
- skill certification for demonstrating learner competence upon completion of programs and providing transportable credentials, and
- placement of recipients of occupational education in their respective fields of preparation for documenting program impact in meeting job market needs.

An additional dimension of the vision is to revise the Commission's scope to include those postsecondary occupational education institutions (public, non-profit, and industry based) in the 33

states that presently are not served by a national or regional accrediting agency. The scope would also be expanded to offer accreditation services to those federal agencies that are involved directly and/or indirectly in training personnel for workforce entry (e. g., Departments of Education, Labor, Commerce, Defense, and Agriculture). The increasing participation of community-based organizations in workforce preparation throughout the nation represents a need that will be addressed as well through an expanded scope for the Commission. The thorough analysis, revision, and potential replacement of COEI standards would be aimed at placing emphases on the assurance of quality and integrity in occupational education programs.

Consideration will also be given to the feasibility of (1) extending accreditation services to occupational/technical education at the secondary school level and (2) developing a program certification process that could be offered to occupational education providers in any setting. The core evaluative standards and procedures would be essentially the same as those used in the evaluation of programs in occupational education institutions, i. e., emphasis on skill standards, skill certification, and placement of recipients of occupational education. An essential criterion in determining feasibility for efforts in these two areas is that a rigorous process to assure program quality and integrity can be utilized.

The Partners in Outcomes-Based Accreditation

The new COEI will have many partners who have interests in occupational education and can make positive contributions to its improvement. Those partners potentially include the following:

- federal and state governments which are responsible for assuring accountability by technical education providers,
- business and industry with interests in the effectiveness of workforce preparation to compete in the global economy,
- labor and specialized worker groups who can benefit from a program quality assurance initiative that provides competent workers with transportable credentials, and
- other support entities that can contribute and receive benefits, such as research and development agencies, workforce development centers, and professional occupational education associations.

The partnership with federal agencies involved in any way with occupational education offers exciting possibilities for the new COEI. The accrediting agency could fill a very important role in serving as the "gatekeeper" for the potential providers of technical education. The application of uniform and rigorous outcomes-based standards for technical education accreditation would promote compliance with substantive qualitative requirements and create conditions to promote excellence in workforce preparation programs. The accrediting agency would be expected to work closely with federal agencies such as the Departments of Education, Labor, Commerce, Defense, and Agriculture as well as other agencies involved in workforce preparation.

The new COEI would be expected to foster close working relationships with the emerging federally funded State Postsecondary Review Entities (SPREs), especially during the formative stage over the next few years, in the development of their institutional review systems. Through cooperative efforts, the accrediting agency would be in a key position to benefit from the developmental work of the SPREs collectively and to assist in defining roles for the SPREs and accrediting agency which are minimally redundant with other oversight agencies. The involvement of state boards and directors of secondary and postsecondary occupational education would be sought as well.

Business and industry as well as labor groups would be enlisted as partners with the new COEI. Their contributions by working with the developers of skill standards and skill certification assessment would be essential to the new accreditation process. They will fill major roles with the accrediting agency in governance and advisory capacities.

Many agencies and entities are engaged in activities that have much relevance to program quality assurance. For example, research and development agencies can contribute to the work of the new COEI through their research and development efforts that deal with institutional and program impact. Workforce development centers are engaged in activities that have implications for occupational education program quality improvement. Assessment organizations have expertise that can be applied in the development of skill certification measures for use by occupational education providers. Associations of occupational/technical educators (e. g., vocational and technical educators, state directors of vocational-technical education) would be encouraged to participate in the work of the accrediting agency.

Tentative Timeline for Implementation

The minimal time requirement for transition from the current accreditation system to the new system is expected to be about two years. During this transition period, the current requirements for the accreditation of institutions will be applied with rigor as they are now. Concurrently, the development of revised standards of institutional accreditation will be initiated with a target date of December, 1995, for completion and adoption. Although candidates for accreditation might be accepted during this time, a moratorium could be imposed on initial accreditation of institutions until the new standards are developed. A possible schedule of events during the transition period is as follows:

June, 1994	Endorsement by federal officials of the concept for a new national occupational education accrediting agency
June, 1994	Decision by COEI to expand scope/Initiation of discussion on restructuring COEI with the Board, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
July-August, 1994	Communication with institutional members regarding the action plan and solicitation of participation/Charter filed to create non-profit corporate entity named the "Council on Occupational Education, Inc."/Initiation of contacts with stakeholders and other parties potentially interested in accreditation of occupational education to solicit participation in task groups/Conclusion of an agreement by COEI and the U. S. Department of Education on an action plan to maintain COEI recognition by the U. S. Secretary of Education during the transition period
August-December, 1994	Formation of task groups to deal with critical areas such as governance, organization, institutional accreditation standards, program certification feasibility, transition to new standards
October, 1994	Progress report on transition to the Commission
October, 1994	Submission of application to U. S. Secretary of Education for continued recognition of COEI
November, 1994-May, 1995	Meetings and staff work in support of task groups

December, 1994	Presentation of items on transition for action by COEI member institutions at 1994 Annual Meeting Business Session/Report on progress of transition to the Board, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
January-May, 1995	Continuation of meetings and staff support of task groups
March, 1995	Progress report on transition to the Commission
May, 1995	Appearance before the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity, U. S. Department of Education, to support application for continued recognition by the Secretary of Education
June, 1995	Progress report on transition to the Commission and to the Board, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
July-October, 1995	Completion of work on initial charges to task groups
October, 1995	Progress report on transition to the Commission
December, 1995	Presentation of final items on transition for action by COEI member institutions at 1995 Annual Meeting Business Session
January, 1996-	Continuous review of policies, standards, and procedures to improve assurance of occupational education program quality and integrity

Concluding Statement

Since its inception early in this century, institutional accreditation has undergone many changes in philosophy and process as refinement has occurred. The history of accreditation reveals that it has become the best known mechanism for ensuring institutional quality in this country. The view of Young and his associates captures the essence of this history: "The genius of accreditation is that it began with the impossible task of defining educational quality and in just 25 years evolved, by trial and error, into a process that advances educational quality" (Young, Chambers, Kells, & Associates, 1983, p. 13). Technical school accreditation performed by COEI has had a similar history since 1971 as it has evolved into an effective process to assure quality in occupational education institutions. With its commitment to make its accreditation even more outcomes-based, the new COEI is leading a move into a new era for institutional accreditation and quality assurance.

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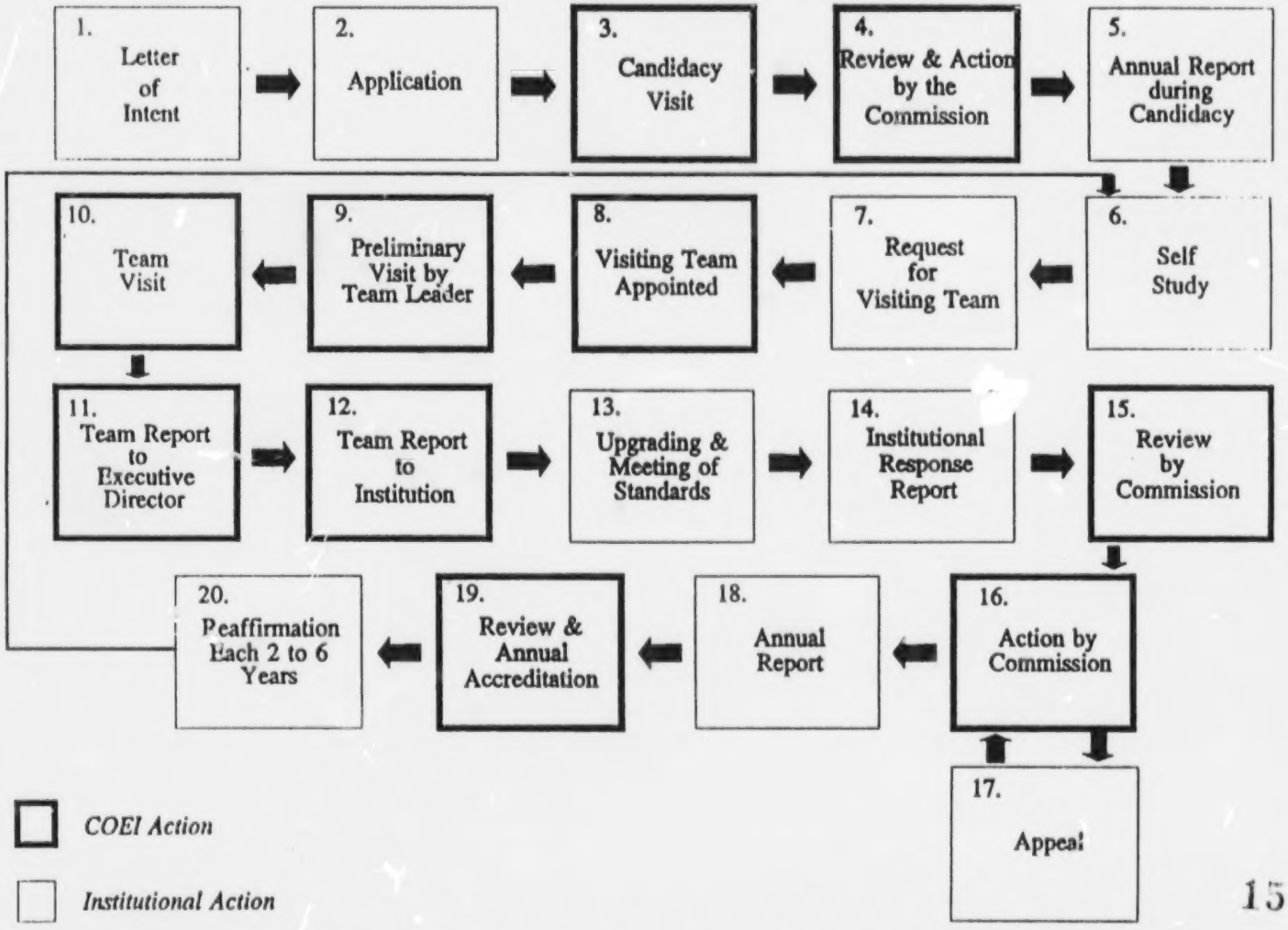
Figure 1

The Accreditation Process

Commission on Occupational Education Institutions


1. Letter of Intent
2. Application
3. Candidacy Visit
4. Review & Action by the Commission
5. Annual Report during Candidacy
6. Self Study
7. Request for Visiting Team
8. Visiting Team Appointed
9. Preliminary Visit by Team Leader
10. Team Visit
11. Team Report to Executive Director
12. Team Report to Institution
13. Upgrading & Meeting of Standards
14. Institutional Response Report
15. Review by Commission
16. Action by Commission
17. Appeal
18. Annual Report
19. Review & Annual Accreditation
20. Reaffirmation Each 2 to 6 Years
COEI Action
Institutional Action